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World Chronicle

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GUEST: **Ivanka CORTI**
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United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

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WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Ivanka CORTI, Chairman of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, reviews the progress made in the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. All international human rights declarations and conventions state that men and women are equal, but many Governments attach reservations to the implementation of these rights. Ms. Corti believes that true democracy should guarantee equality between the two genders in all aspects of life.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Although women's issues have clearly advanced in recent decades, gender discrimination remains an obstacle to the full achievement of all women's rights. Today hundreds of millions of women and girls are still deprived of their right to education, employment and health care, and suffer from poverty as well as physical and emotional abuse. This situation denies women in many countries around the world full participation in the development of their societies.

Our guest today is Ivanka Corti, Chairman of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Joining me to talk with Ms. Corti are Thalif Deen of Inter Press Service and Judy Lessing of Radio New Zealand. Ms. Corti, welcome to World Chronicle.

CORTI: Thank you very much.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Corti, just before we came on the air, I was talking to the head of the United Nations Department of Public Information, Samir Sanbar — this programme comes under his bailiwick — and he told me that his Department is the first Department in the United Nations to have achieved gender equality, 50-50, and that many —

CORTI: It is the only one.

LITTLEJOHNS: And many of the women are in very high positions. But the United Nations as a whole doesn't have a very good record, right?

CORTI: No. Unfortunately not. Unfortunately, even if they are promoting equality world-wide, but in their home they didn't achieve that, and they are very far from that percentage. Maybe the public information service is the only one in the UN house that achieved that. And the rest of the UN, it's very far from that point. The Secretary-General, when he was appointed as Secretary-General of the UN, promised. But this promise is very slow to be realized.

LITTLEJOHNS: But it's not his fault, it's the fault of the Member States.

CORTI: No. Yes, absolutely. It's absolutely because the Member States, when we have the big conferences, they put on paper very good decisions, but then they don't push the realization of these decisions.

LITTLEJOHNS: The Convention* against discrimination against women, what does it actually call for in terms of gender equality? Does it require some –

CORTI: Yes, of course. Yes, it requires – this is the Convention which requires also – and you mentioned that still women are discriminated [against], but you didn't mention a very important field, this is decision-making. They are excluded from decision-making posts, and this is, I think, as far as we know in our Committee, the most difficult thing for women to get into, and also to realize equality. Because there is resistance from men in politics and decision-making to allow women to reach equality. We are very far from that, and the average level is a little bit more than 10 per cent. So as we –

LITTLEJOHNS: Decision-makers, you're talking about.

CORTI: Yes, decision-making posts, or policy, as you want. This is the same. As we are speaking, and the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993 proclaimed that democracy is the only system in which human rights can be respected, but we are asking ourselves which kind of democracy we have if half of the population is excluded in the decision-making. So, this, we have to put this question also in, the question of the exclusion of women in decision-making posts, also as a question of real democracy.

DEEN: While on the subject of a the Convention, and Michael raised this issue, this Convention is to prevent discrimination, all types of discrimination against women.

CORTI: Yes.

DEEN: I'm told this Convention was approved by the General Assembly in 1979.

CORTI: Yes, exactly.

DEEN: But there are only 43 countries that have ratified so far.

CORTI: No.

DEEN: Even – 43?

CORTI: No.

DEEN: Ratification?

CORTI: Up to now?

DEEN: Yes, up to now.

CORTI: No. 150. 150 up to now.

DEEN: So it is already in force.

CORTI: Yes, it is already in force. Yes. Yes, it's already in force. In '79, then, the Convention entered into force after the twentieth ratification, in 1981. But from '81 up to now, we have now exactly 150.

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* The Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 1979.

DEEN: Is it being implemented?

CORTI: This is another problem, yes. You know, our Convention speaks about *de jure* and *de facto*, *de facto* realization of the implementation. As far as *de jure* implementation is concerned, I can say that much more progress has been done than in *de facto* realization of the implementation of the Convention. We are so far from that, you know. But slow progress has been made, and they are also backed by the decisions of different world conferences, especially the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights and then the Cairo conference on population, and Copenhagen.* And then all these conferences were improved by the Beijing conference, the Fourth World Conference on Women [Beijing, 1995].

LESSING: But when you talk about 150 countries have signed on –

CORTI: No, ratified.

LESSING: Ratified, yes. They've ratified the Convention, so they're part of the system, but quite a number of them still have reservations, do they not? So how successful is the Convention when you look at what countries have said, "Yes, we are part of it, but....", and it's the "buts" that seem to me to be very important.

CORTI: The "buts" are very important, yes. But it is not only the problem of the women's Convention, it's a problem of all the human rights treaties. But what is particular to this Convention, we have, for instance, reservations on our Convention on some subjects that the States have not put on the same subject in the other treaty bodies, or in the other treaties, you know, human rights treaties. This is very curious. And the problem of the reservations is a very serious one. But it is not a matter that the Committee by itself can deal with. This is the problem of the UN, the UN as such that has to examine how we can overcome this obstacle. Because several countries, when they put a reservation on such an article, they say "We are not bound by that article", and of course they are not bound by that article, but what is the purpose then of ratification, you know? And also, what is the respect of the international obligation? Then you enter in the field of international and national law: Which one is more important? We have to fight to give force to the international law, much more.

DEEN: Are there many countries which have expressed reservations?

CORTI: Yes.

DEEN: The majority of countries, is it?

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*The World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993); the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994); the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995).

CORTI: Yes. I can't tell the majority of the countries, but a lot of countries, yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: What kind of reservations, Ms. Corti?

CORTI: The reservations mostly are on family law, you know, and some of the reservations on our Convention are –

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean the ownership of property and that kind of thing?

CORTI: Yes, ownership of property, equality in marriage, equality also in adoption, and equality also in marriage, the relationship in the marriage, you know. Because it is the question of who – that equality is not achieved, and a lot of laws, especially customary or religious laws that are in force in some countries, they give the priority to men.

LESSING: But some people would say why would any international convention, or even a national law, get into questions about how families run their family business? I'm not talking about inheritance in this case, but, for instance, violence against women often takes place within a marriage. And yet we're trying to stop violence against women. But you come across – it becomes difficult sometimes, you have to climb over the wall of non-acceptance, which is often cultural.

CORTI: Yes, yes. Absolutely it's cultural, traditional or religious, you know. But we have to enter also. We have to enter in the private life because, you know, we can't accept – if we accept the principles of human rights, so we have also to accept the relationships between – inter-personal relationships, and especially in the family. We can't any more support, you know, this, as you said, and mentioned, violence. Because we discovered that this is a world-wide phenomenon. And it is in all cultures: all the traditions, all the religions, you know, tolerated it. So, if we are now in the period of the respect of the human rights and equality, we have also to enter into that field.

DEEN: You mentioned about the discrimination against women in the UN system itself. There has been a proposal to set up a separate UN agency for women. What are your views on this?

CORTI: You know, it is already the practice, because you have the Division for the Advancement of Women. It's a separate –

DEEN: Out of the Secretariat?

CORTI: Yes. It's inside the system, the Division for the Advancement of Women. But, you know, I'm not so much in favour of that, because women's issues are not any more part of the world issues. They are social issues, they are issues of society. They are issues also as the UN proclaimed equality, and in all the conferences women's rights have to be part of the mainstream of the UN. So why by a separate – why two separate.... You have to go through and put a so-called "gender perspective" in all the parts of the UN system, you know. And then not to establish a separate office or something, department or so.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Corti, let's talk a bit about your Committee. I think it's a committee of 23?

CORTI: Twenty-three, yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: And all the members are women?

CORTI: For the moment all the members are women. We had in the –

LITTLEJOHNS: But you don't serve as representatives of Governments, but rather in your private personal capacities?

CORTI: All, we are – once elected, we immediately stop with our relationships with our Governments and we deal in our own capacity as independent experts.

LITTLEJOHNS: And rather than lawyers and politicians, you're social people, right? Sociologists and –

CORTI: Yes, no, we – yes. We have, and it is a very positive experience that we have, because women's issues, you know, you can't look at women's issues only from the legal point of view. There are social problems, there are traditional problems, and also there are geographical problems. And this is why we also have, when we have from one region, you know, the reports, our experts coming from that region pose many more questions, because they know the problems of the region. So it is very diverse composition, but it enriches the experience of the committee.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Ivanka Corti, Chairman of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

LESSING: You've been talking about the Committee, and I know that the Committee works terribly hard, and yet you've got almost no time to look at all these reports, because they keep coming in year after year. Something else that you're also doing, I understand, is having a look at the place of women in politics and how they're represented around the world. They haven't been represented very much. I mean, there hasn't been much upward movement in recent years. Why is that important? Why is it important to look at having women in that area of decision-making?

CORTI: It is the most important, in my opinion. And may I say to you why it is important? It is because if you think about an average of 10 per cent world-wide – and we have countries where this percentage is much lower, you have 2 per cent and 5 per cent and so on – you can say freely that women were excluded from politics. I will not say that women are better. But they will bring something new to politics. And I think that, if I can express myself in this way, women will bring a new quality to politics, not because women are better – no, we are human beings like men – but because we have a special view on everyday life: we have to combine our duties out of the home and inside the home – the survival, in most cases, the survival of the family. How to manage the budget? How to see

about the environment? How to raise the children, and to grow up the children? So may I say that we have a much more practical sense of the things of everyday life, and this is what has to be brought into politics world-wide. Because, in my opinion, this is a big crisis in politics, there are no new ideas in politics, and politics and politicians are much more and more world-wide divided from the needs of the population, from the needs of the people. This is why I think that politics in the terms of ancient Greece are in crisis.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Corti, would you say that women in general have perhaps a stronger social conscience than men?

CORTI: Absolutely.

LITTLEJOHNS: And are more compassionate?

CORTI: Absolutely. This is – we come here to our biological nature, you know, because we are mothers, and we have to fight for the survival and to manage everyday life.

LITTLEJOHNS: So if there were more women in politics, politics would not perhaps be quite as sleazy as it's proved to be in many countries.

CORTI: No. No, of course. And we will achieve another aim, you know, and I think this is the full democracy, complete democracy. Because we will achieve the partnership, what democracy means exactly, etymologically. You know, to participate, participation. So we can't avoid the participation of one part of the world, with special needs, with special needs, but together with man.

DEEN: The UN just concluded one of its biggest conferences in Beijing, on women. And they adopted a declaration and a programme of action. But is there any money to implement this programme of action?

CORTI: It's up to the States parties. States parties committed themselves, and now they have to realize their commitment. They –

DEEN: These are the countries themselves.

CORTI: Countries.

DEEN: The UN has no input.

CORTI: No. Of course, the UN has the input as far as the States parties of the UN commit themselves, also as the UN system lives on the contributions, the countries' contributions, you know.

LESSING: Could we talk a little bit about some of the reports that you get, and particularly from those countries which have just come out of some kind of internal strife, whether you call it a civil war or an ethnic war or something like that. I understand you had a special report from Bosnia and I think from Croatia not so long ago. What does this tell us? Does it tell us anything we didn't know already?

CORTI: No. We know, because it is not a new phenomenon. You know, what happened first of all in former Yugoslavia and now is happening in Rwanda, it's going on in Rwanda, Burundi, in Somalia, and so on. In all the wars, women were the biggest victims of the wars, and also suffered different kinds of violence. What happened that was new, it was on the ethnic cleansing basis, exercised from all the parts, you know. We have a general recommendation on violence against women especially, and we were the first UN body who recognized, even before the former Yugoslavia war started, that the violence exercised on women in civil strife or international conflict is a special kind of violence. So on this basis, we asked on a special, exceptional basis to give to us an extraordinary report just on the issue of the violence. And this we had already from Bosnia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia, and also Yugoslavia Federation. And now in this session we will hear from Rwanda. Unfortunately, it's not a new phenomenon, but it came out much more clearly this time, may I say, and much – it had a much more massive dimension.

LESSING: Is it almost as if violence against women is connected with a military policy or a government policy? Or, you win at all costs and if the women happen to get in the way that's just bad luck?

CORTI: Yes. Yes. Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. The origin of that, it's what exactly our Convention says, that it is the belief in the inferiority of women. So when you came – in wartime it's the power of men that comes out, you know. And it has to go toward women as victims, as inferior, inferior human beings.

LITTLEJOHNS: But all the conventions in the world are not going to change that. I mean, this is a cultural thing very largely, is it not? And even if religions in some cases may encourage women's rights, it's still very difficult to –

CORTI: You are completely right. But we are entering in the [United Nations] Decade for Human Rights Education [1995-2004]. And this is why we have to mobilize ourselves to make understood to all human beings that we are as the Charter or the Universal Declaration declares, that we are equal, you know, as human beings and equal in respect of our human rights and dignity. So if it – and this can help a lot, you know.

DEEN: When you talk about violence against women in conflict situations, there are some complaints that the women are not equitably represented in peace-keeping missions.

CORTI: Absolutely. Absolutely. They are completely excluded. They are completed excluded from peace-keeping missions and also from negotiation processes, from negotiation processes for peace or for deciding to go to war or not to go to war, you know. And this is in the process. I'm sure that women will reflect, not because they are much more peaceful than men, I don't want to say that women – give them a quality that they

don't have, but certainly they will reflect much more thoroughly on the decision to go to war or not to go, you know, because of their family obligations and so on, and responsibilities.

LESSING: How do you get men to help bring women into decision-making, into politics, into negotiations, into all the things we've been talking about? Because doesn't it need a sort of two-person street?

CORTI: Absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely. This is why we have to educate men also to respect, to respect women and to respect the qualities and the values of women. This is – both sides education that we have: empowerment of women, yes, because they have to become self confident, and for men also to understand that women also are able to enter into the public life and to have the same responsibilities but also the same opportunities.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Corti, but a lot of women, particularly here in the United States, are opposed to equal rights for women. The Equal Rights Amendment, for example, was very largely opposed by women in some states because of theories that women and men would use the same toilet facilities and this kind of stuff. And of course we all know –

CORTI: This is a little bit the naive approach. I mean –

LITTLEJOHNS: We know about the problems that Hillary Rodham Clinton has had, partly because people think that she was too uppity and asserting herself too much. How do you cope with that attitude?

CORTI: You know, from my personal point of view, I very much regret that the public opinion, American public opinion put backwards Ms. Hillary Clinton, who is a very able woman. And she did this health reform very well, and it was for the progress of the American society. So it seems to me as far as the other problem is concerned in America, the United States of America is known world-wide as a democratic country. So you have to respect the rights of all. There are people who are in favour of, and there are people who are strongly opposed to several laws. You know, it's a question of self determination. Those who are against have to accept those who are in favour, you know. And I think that the majority of American women are in favour.... I'm not entering into the very delicate question of abortion, you know. I'm not entering into that, because I don't want to enter into that, because it is in my opinion a problem of one's conscience. But we have also to see another problem which is a world-wide problem, and which came out very clearly in the Cairo Conference and also in the Beijing Conference –

LITTLEJOHNS: That was the Population Conference.

CORTI: The Population Conference and also the Beijing Conference, you know. We have very clear statistics about the incidence of illegal abortion through the mortality of women. So this is also a problem.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Corti, thank you very much for all your comments. That's all the time we have on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Ivanka Corti, Chairman of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. She was interviewed by Thalif Deen of Inter Press Service and Judy Lessing of Radio New Zealand.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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